

Hey did y'all know 2024's an election year? Back in the summer, the Episcopal Church elected a new Presiding Bishop! Now, the Presiding Bishop is my grand-boss and serves for a nine year term. I mention this because the new Presiding Bishop always takes office on All Saints' Day, which feels right 'cause All Saints' honors the saints of the church. The Episcopal Church doesn't really come at saints the same way you might be thinking. Saints aren't flawless people, they're regular. We've got some especially good models, but mostly, when we talk about all the saints, we're talking about us. Regular people. Regular people now, and regular people across time. Regular people doing our best. That's what All Saints' is about at its core. And on All Saints' we remember our connection to those who came before and our responsibility to those who will come after. So, it's the perfect time to put the Presiding Bishop in office with the weight of history and present and future dangling above the office like a sacred Sword of Damocles. That also means today's the perfect day for a blowout party. We honor all that responsibility in this place, the debt we owe to our forebears and the gifts we leave for our progeny. It just so happens that we do it with jazz.

I've been thinking lately about what St. Thomas' has survived. This congregation's about to be 190 years old. In 1835, before my home state was a state, a cart full of prayer books and a dedicated few set our foundation. It was a busy year, 1835. Charles Darwin's *Beagle* landed in the Galapagos. The national debt fell to zero for the first and only time in our nation's history. England hanged two gay men for what they called "buggery," the last time they hanged anyone for that supposed crime. The New York Stock Exchange burned down, America fought the Seminoles, Uruguay erupted in civil war, Texas captured San Antonio, Ontario opened a new prison, a ship full of Irish women convicts sank, China got hit by a massive typhoon, and Americans were captivated by the Great Moon Hoax. In case you've never heard of the Great Moon Hoax, "scientists" "discovered" "life" on the moon, a space oasis populated mostly by bat-people, tiny zebras, and goats with only one horn, not to be confused with the unicorns you can also find on that rock.

Sounds like a typical news day. Since then, St. Thomas' has been through a lot. In 1836, the Chenango Canal opened. In 1847, this building was finished. In 1860 Central New York grew almost 90% of the country's hops. Madison County became known as one of the most loyal counties in the country during the Civil War, and that yellow house across the street was a hospital for Union soldiers. 1868 brought the railroad. Hamilton burned in 1895. The 1920s brought the hops blight and the pivot to dairy farming. The Parish House behind us burned down in 1954, and chocolate spilled all over town in 1955. In the 1990s, we started serving hot meals for Friendship Inn. Hamiltonians went to war in the 1860s, 1910s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and just about every decade since. Hamiltonians also got born, baptized, grew up, got married, had kids, had grandkids, aged, and died. Nearly ten generations since St. Thomas' started, and that's not counting the many, many who lived here first, and that's not counting the many yet to be born either.

When we talk about All Saints', all that's what we're talking about. All the people, all they lived through, all they created, and all they lost. All we're navigating now, all we're living through, all we create, and all we lose. All that the people 190 years from now will face and what they'll see of us when they look back. In a way, we're talking about our legacy, a shared legacy that spans time but is firmly rooted in place. There's the legacy we inherit and the legacy we leave, and today holds both of 'em with fondness and, if I'm honest, a little bit of nervousness. In some ways, I'd love for right now to be the shining-est light in St. Thomas' history, a period that'll echo down the ages for our great and inspiring faithfulness. But another part hopes we can fly under history's radar. I don't mean we should bury our heads in the sand and ignore the wiles of the world, I just wish the world didn't present us with so many chances to be heroically faithful.

These days, there's an elephant in just about every room--or a donkey, if you prefer. There's a big critter in the room, and the odds are good that Tuesday isn't going to bring the end of it. I'm not talking about red or blue, I'm talking about faithfulness and that weight of time that's looking to see what we do. 190 years of history watching and at least that long (we hope) of the future wondering why we did what we did. We don't have the luxury of burying our heads. What's got me worried these days is Christianity itself. Christianity has almost never been a single, like-minded entity. Pretty much from the moment Jesus handed over the keys, we've had divisions. For a long, long time, the bulk of Christianity chose the more inclusive side of those divisions, but something changed. It's hard to pinpoint when, but something changed, and the church stopped caring about who we let in and got more interested in who we kept out. Even within the Episcopal Church, it's hard to know which kind you're stepping into. Churches have gotten pretty savvy at using phrases like "All are welcome" to mean anything but "all are welcome." There's a worrying thread of purity weaving its way through modern Christianity. Depending on which pews you land in, that purity can extend to words or sex or the voting booth or the history in your blood. I'm worried about who gets to decide what and who is pure enough. There's a retired bishop from a few states over who says "It's funny, isn't it? That you can preach a judgmental and vengeful and angry God and nobody will mind. But you start preaching a God that's too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind...and you're in trouble."

Jesus says the two greatest commandments are: Love God and love your neighbor. Nothing's more important. Now, I'm not exactly a Biblical literalist, but I'm willing to be labeled an extremist if I can be an extremist for love. Jesus doesn't say that "Love God and Love your neighbor" are suggestions. They're commandments, and they don't come with an asterisk letting us off the hook. "Love God and Love your neighbor so long as they're Christian or straight or white or just like me?" Nope, I don't know what that is, but it's not Jesus. Love God, love your neighbor. Period. No exceptions. Love God, love your neighbor. Nothing's more important. Now, that big donkey/elephant critter looms ahead of us this week, and I know we're all tired of hearing about it. But unfortunately, it's gonna be part of our legacy, no matter what history does with it. The day looms ahead for us as citizens, sure, but also for us as Christians. Being here at St. Thomas' may only occupy an hour or so of your week, but I hope you hear those most important commandments during this fraction of your time and carry them with you. Love God, love your neighbor. That's what we pray for every week. We pray for the church, for good governance, and for the strength to love our enemies and feed our neighbors. Scripture tells us to care for the poor, to challenge the wealthy, to seek justice, do mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We've got that old saying I've been repeating lately, "Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on you." I don't see how good Christian souls can make all these promises, say all these prayers, and then act against them. It's a self-defeating loop. If I pray for the poor to be housed, say, and then vote or speak or work against them getting housing, I put a roadblock in front of myself, and I mock the act of prayer. Y'all, if we believe this Jesus stuff even a shred, or if we at least think that Jesus guy had some good ideas, we'd best look at what jives with him and what doesn't before stepping into the ballot box. And we'd best cast our votes with integrity.

So we ask, what does loving our neighbor look like? When we reflect back on what this place has survived, what honors the love and commitment of those struggles? When we look to the future, what gives a church like us focused on loving our neighbors the best chance of still being here? When we stand in line on Tuesday, what makes it easier to feed the hungry and house the homeless? But we don't stop once we get that prized "I voted" sticker. Keep going. Keep voting. Vote for love when you meet a stranger. Vote for compassion when you love the broken. Vote for dignity when you love the abused. Vote for love.

One last thing, and then I'll leave y'all to it. Love is not a cover for other motivations. There's no room in love for hate or discrimination or lies. Love is pure, and anything that takes advantage of that is a distortion.

Much as I love nuance, “Love God, love your neighbor” doesn’t allow for much of it. It’s simpler than people tend to make it and because it’s simple, it’s dang hard. Love God, love your neighbor doesn’t have an asterisk. We can’t wiggle out of it, and we can’t act against it and pretend everything’s still intact. Love God, love your neighbor. That’s our legacy. It’s not the most exciting thing. It probably won’t even show up as a blip on the timeline of our church, but it is absolutely earth-shattering if we do it. Take that with you, everywhere. In every place you go from today on, vote for love. Nothing’s more important.